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Abstract

Investigates the role and symbolism of dragons and serpents in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, with side excursions into Lewis and Tolkien for their takes on the topic. Concludes that dragons are morally neutral in her world, while serpents generally represent or are allied with evil.

Additional Keywords

Dragons in C.S. Lewis; Dragons in J.K. Rowling; Dragons in J.R.R. Tolkien; Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter* novels; Serpents in C.S. Lewis; Serpents in J.K. Rowling



DRAGONS AND SERPENTS IN
J.K. ROWLING'S
HARRY POTTER SERIES:
ARE THEY EVIL?

LAUREN BERGDAN

ONE OF THE GREAT PLEASURES of reading the *Harry Potter* series stems from the numerous mythological and literary references that J.K. Rowling has included in her magical universe. Rowling's amazing ability to merge these cultural allusions with material that is unique to her works is best illustrated by her depiction of the most familiar antagonists in the Bible and other works of literature, the serpent and the dragon.

It is important to note that even though the term "dragon" is designated by the Latin *draco* while "snake" is designated *serpens*, in many literary texts and sources the symbolism of "serpent," "snake," and "dragon" are either synonymous or closely related (Rose 327). For instance, the Bible consistently identifies both the snake and the dragon with evil, and the term "dragon" was often used during the Middle Ages to denote the concept of sin (Gravestock 126). In addition, T. H. White's *The Book of Beasts* defines the dragon as the "biggest of all serpents" (White 165), and J.R.R. Tolkien classifies the serpent as a type of dragon, or Great Worm (Day 197). Contrary to this portrayal of serpents and dragons as interchangeable entities, J.K. Rowling makes a clear distinction in her series between these creatures as they serve different functions within the moral framework that she has fashioned. The serpents in the *Harry Potter* books are mainly associated with the forces of darkness against which the hero and his allies are destined to fight, while the dragons in the series are not specifically allied to either side in this cosmic battle.

Serpents have been the subject of myth and folklore from time immemorial and are linked to the ancient serpent-worshipping religions of the world (Rose 327). This fascinating creature is the embodiment of contradiction as it symbolizes both death and destruction due to its poisonous venom or fatally

tight squeeze, as well as life and resurrection in light of its ability to shed and renew its skin (Gordon 613).

The snake plays a rich and complex role in ancient Egyptian belief, and is frequently depicted as an elemental symbol of chaos and evil. For example, the monstrous snake Apophis was seen as an aggressive and treacherous instrument of evil that could bring about the Apocalypse. According to the myth, Apophis would lay in wait every night to ambush the sun god, Ra, thereby preventing the sun from rising. Consequently, every sunrise and sunset is an indication that Ra has defeated his serpentine foe and will not allow the world to die (Kronzek & Kronzek 206).

In early Arab and Hebrew demonology, the serpent also occupied a prominent place, most likely due to the dread it inspired by its swift and subtle movements, unchanging expressions, and deadly nature (Langton 7; Kronzek & Kronzek 207). In the Old Testament, the snake appears as a fearsome and malicious creature with which man lives in enmity. This hostile relationship begins in the book of Genesis when Satan selects the tempting serpent of Eden as the most suitable instrument to bring about the fall of man (Langton 55; Rose 328), and continues in Christian lore where the snake is depicted as wound around a cross, suggesting the all encompassing power of evil. In addition, the serpent is sometimes portrayed with the icon of a woman's head to symbolize lust and temptation (de Vries 412), and may also be depicted at the foot of the cross where it is a symbol of good triumphing over evil (de Vries 413). Finally, the villainous Midgard snake of Norse Mythology is a giant destructive serpent that represents the malignant powers of the universe and will ultimately bring about the final destruction of the earth (Kronzek & Kronzek 206; Rose 329).

Despite these powerful associations with evil, the snake has also been endowed with noble qualities, and is often associated not only with death, chaos, and terror but also with fertility, healing, wisdom, and insight (Kronzek & Kronzek 206). For instance, the ancient Aztecs of Central America held the mythical plumed serpent, Quetzalcoatl, in high esteem due to its status as powerful religious symbol (Gordon 570), and the Egyptians revered the cobra goddess, Renenutet, as a repository of supreme wisdom and good fortune (Watterson 97). Moreover, the Australian Aborigines associated a giant rainbow serpent with the creation of life, and the ancient Greeks viewed it as a symbol of the medical arts (Kronzek & Kronzek 207). Thus, the symbol of the medical profession is a Caduceus, a winged staff with two serpents entwined around it. This belief stems from the mythical figure Aesculapius who discovered medicine by watching as one snake used herbs to bring another snake back to life. Furthermore, in classic Roman culture, snakes were associated with fertility and healing, and were regarded as the beneficent spirits of the dead (Wheatcroft 144).

While the serpents in the *Harry Potter* series play a significant role in the text, it is not their life-affirming characteristics that are highlighted but their negative associations with death and destruction via their involvement with Rowling's malicious villains (Berner & Millman 69). In general, the serpent motif recurs in each of the *Harry Potter* books as the emblem of Slytherin House. Moreover, it materializes in five separate books as an amalgamation of this theme's traditional aspects combined with the unique innovations that characterize Rowling's mythic creations. The first occurrence is in *The Philosopher's Stone* [PS]¹ when Harry encounters a Brazilian boa constrictor and learns that he can speak snake language. The snake then appears twice in *The Chamber of Secrets* [CS], first during a meeting of the dueling club, and then at the end of the book where Harry must battle Tom Riddle's dreaded "pet" basilisk. It also emerges in *The Goblet of Fire* [GF] where it turns up in the symbol of the Dark Lord, a skull sprouting a forked tongue, and in the form of Voldemort's serpentine companion, the revolting Nagini. The serpent motif is also apparent in *The Order of the Phoenix* [OP] where Lord Voldemort takes possession of Nagini in order to enter the Ministry of Magic and ruthlessly attacks Arthur Weasley, as well as during the climactic duel scene between the Dark Lord and Dumbledore when the former uses a serpent against his nemesis.² The final appearance of the snake is in *The Deathly Hallows* [DH] where Nagini demonstrates her ability to adopt human form by transforming into Bathilda Bagshot, continues her role as Voldemort's devoted familiar by killing Professor Snape, and is finally disposed of by Neville Longbottom in a manner reminiscent of St. George's slaying of the Dragon in Christian hagiography and medieval romance.

The motif first appears in the second chapter of *The Philosopher's Stone*, when Harry has a conversation with a Brazilian boa constrictor in the reptile house at the zoo. This encounter serves three purposes in the narrative. First, it introduces a theme that will be developed later in the series, namely the fact that Harry is a "parselmouth," one who can communicate in snake language. Second, it illustrates Harry's compassion for those who are abused and downtrodden as indicated when he sympathizes with the caged snake, whose plight he perceives as "worse than having a cupboard as a bedroom" (PS 25), and third, it underscores Harry's fantastic powers in general and foreshadows the significance of his future actions (Killinger 30).

¹ American title: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

² It should also be noted that the snake motif appears in *The Order of the Phoenix* [OP] as well as in *The Half Blood Prince* [HBP] as a decorative symbol in locations associated with the Dark Arts, namely number twelve Grimmauld Place and the Gaunt family residence.

While the incident with the boa constrictor introduces Harry's ability to converse with snakes, the significance of this skill is only developed later in *The Chamber of Secrets* when Harry hears an ominous voice in the corridors of Hogwarts, protects a fellow student from a snake by speaking Parseltongue, and utilizes this fantastic ability to locate and defeat Lord Voldemort's pet basilisk.

The first tangible sign that something is very wrong at Hogwarts appears when Harry hears an eerie voice in Professor Lockhart's office. The ice-cold, venomous voice, which no one else can hear, says: "*Come . . . come to me. . . Let me rip you. . . Let me tear you. . . Let me kill you. . .*" (CS 92). The source of this mysterious phenomenon is unknown at this point, but clearly indicates the important conflict to come. Moreover, when Harry hears the murderous voice a second time, his immediate reaction is to follow the sound: "Harry strained his ears. Distantly, from the floor above, and growing fainter still, he heard the voice: '*. . . I smell blood. . . I SMELL BLOOD!*' [...]' 'It's going to kill someone!' he shouted, and ignoring Ron and Hermione's bewildered faces, he ran up the next flight of steps three at a time" (CS 105). Harry's instinctive response is not to cower in fear when a frightening situation presents itself, but to face it head on and persist until he is certain that everyone is safe. Thus, he does not attempt to escape the threatening voice, but seeks it out in the hope that he can prevent its possessor from harming anyone. This heroic quality proves beyond any doubt that Harry deserves the fame given him at birth and that he is the ideal person to battle the Dark Lord.

The implications surrounding Harry's unique ability are next illustrated during a meeting of the Hogwarts dueling club where the detestable Draco Malfoy conjures a snake in the course of his duel with Harry: "Malfoy raised his wand quickly and bellowed, '*Serpensortia!*' The end of his wand exploded. Harry watched, aghast, as a long black snake shot out of it, fell heavily onto the floor between them and raised itself, ready to strike" (CS 145). Professor Lockhart then angers the creature by sending it flying across the room and into a wall. As the snake approaches another student, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Harry reacts unconsciously by speaking to the snake and ordering it not to attack: "[Harry] wasn't even aware of deciding to do it. All he knew was that his legs were carrying him forward as though he was on casters and that he had shouted stupidly at the snake: 'Leave him alone!' And miraculously—inexplicably—the snake slumped to the floor, docile as a thick, black garden hose, its eyes now on Harry" (CS 145).

Once again Harry's innate courage reinforces his heroic nature, but in this case he is not rewarded for his efforts. Harry expects Justin to be grateful, and is surprised when he and the other students react with fear and anger. Finally, Ron and Hermione explain that Harry is a Parselmouth and that the symbol of Slytherin house is a serpent because its founder, Salazar Slytherin, was famous

for being able to talk to snakes. Consequently, the dueling club incident serves as a catalyst for the emergence of grave doubt concerning Harry's character, and the entire school, including Ron and Hermione, begins to suspect that Harry may be Slytherin's heir even though he has proven himself to be a crusader for good. The students are deeply concerned about Harry's response to the snake, as indicated when a group of Hufflepuffs speculate that he may possess additional dark powers, and as a result Harry is viewed as an outcast and must repeatedly defend himself against accusations that he is responsible for the spree of petrifications at the school.

Eventually, Harry's talent for speaking snake language is put to good use. Hermione realizes that Harry is the only person who can hear the disembodied voice because he is a Parselmouth, and she concludes that the voice must therefore belong to some sort of serpent. Unfortunately, Hermione becomes the creature's next victim before she has time to alert Harry and Ron to her suspicions. In addition, Harry uses his strange ability to open the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. He convinces himself that the snake etched into the side of a copper tap in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom is alive, and manages to hiss "open up" in Parseltongue, which causes the sink to fall away thereby exposing a large pipe "wide enough for a man to slide into" (CS 222).

The second function of the boa constrictor episode may be related to the only other literary work of which I am aware in which a boa constrictor is mentioned, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's classic children's book, *The Little Prince* (*Le petit prince*). In the first chapter of *The Little Prince*, the author describes a moment from his childhood during which he presented to the adults in his life a drawing of a boa constrictor that had swallowed an elephant. The unimaginative adults could not see below the surface of the picture and announced that it looked like a hat. Undeterred, the author drew another picture showing the elephant inside the boa constrictor, whereupon the adults advised him to give up drawing and concentrate on his schoolwork. Later in the book, the author who is now an adult himself meets the mysterious Little Prince who instantly recognizes the picture as a boa constrictor that has swallowed an elephant. The author is greatly impressed because the Little Prince is able to see beyond the superficial to the underlying truth of things, and has the openness and honesty of a child, unlike adults who have become jaded and blind.

Similar to the Little Prince, Harry is able to see beyond the mundane and realizes that the boa constrictor at the zoo is suffering: "[Harry] wouldn't have been surprised if it had died of boredom itself—no company except stupid people drumming their fingers on the glass trying to disturb it all day long" (PS 25). It is at this moment that Harry's sympathy for the snake awakens a skill that has been lying dormant inside him for the past eleven years, and he realizes to his astonishment that he can understand everything the snake says to him:

"Harry sat up and gasped; the glass front of the boa constrictor's tank had vanished. The great snake was uncoiling itself rapidly, slithering out onto the floor. [...] As the snake slid swiftly past him, Harry could have sworn a low, hissing voice said, 'Brazil here I come. . . . Thanksss, amigo'" (PS 26).

The third and final role that this episode plays in the narrative concerns the progress of Harry's magical abilities. At this point in the series, Harry is unaware of his wizard background and is also unable to recognize magic, even his own, when it occurs. For instance, he cannot explain how his hair grew back overnight after his aunt sheared it off or how he landed on the school roof while escaping Dudley and his gang. Thus, when he unconsciously releases the boa constrictor, he is mystified and does not connect this supernatural event with his own power. However, this incident is a precursor for the gradual development of Harry's magical skills, which proceeds from total ignorance to full awareness and eventual mastery. Moreover, Harry's ability to converse with snakes is a very rare talent in the wizard world, and is regarded as rather sinister due to the fact that "[e]veryone knows [its] the mark of a Dark wizard" (CS 148). Thus, this skill sets Harry apart from the rest of the wizard community, and is an indication of his significance in the battle against the forces of darkness as evidenced in *The Chamber of Secrets*.

As previously mentioned, the serpent motif appears twice in *The Chamber of Secrets*, first in the dueling club chapter, and then at the end when Harry must fight for his life in a deadly confrontation with the mythological monster that inhabits the chamber, namely a gigantic snake called a basilisk. The word *basilisk* comes from the Greek *basiliskos* and means "little king" (Borges 43; Breiner 113). In classical times this imaginary beast was envisaged as a desert-dwelling serpent with a deadly stare and a venomous tongue that could split rocks, burn grass, rot fruit and kill on sight (Gordon 77). According to myth, the basilisk sprang to life from the blood of the slain Medusa, a Gorgon with snakes instead of hair who could turn any living creature to stone merely by looking at it (Borges 44). Through the ages its appearance has changed and it is often described as a yellow-feathered, four-legged cock with a crown, thorny wings, and a serpent's tail ending in a hook or another cock's head; hence it also became known as the "Cockatrice" (Borges 44; Gordon 77). The only useful weapons against it are a mirror, as the sight of its own image will strike it dead; a caged rooster, whose crow will send it scurrying; and a weasel, who is unaffected by the monster and will attack it (Breiner 115; Borges 44; Gordon 77). J.K. Rowling's description of the basilisk in her novel bears a strong resemblance to these classical sources, as illustrated by the scrap of paper taken from "a very old library book" that Hermione has clutched in her hand after she is petrified by the basilisk. The paper describes "the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents." The snake is "born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad," kills with

"deadly and venomous fangs" or with "a murderous stare." According to the text, it is the mortal enemy of spiders who flee from it, and only a crowing rooster is fatal to it (CS 215). All of the pieces of the puzzle suddenly come together after Harry and Ron read this piece of paper. They realize that the basilisk is controlled with Parseltongue and that no one has died yet because none of the petrified victims looked directly at the basilisk; Mrs. Norris saw its reflection in a puddle of water, Colin saw it through his camera lens, Justin through Nearly Headless Nick, and Hermione and Penelope through a mirror. Ron and Harry then deduce that the basilisk is also responsible for Moaning Myrtle's death and that the entrance to the chamber is in her bathroom. It should be noted that Peggy Huey provides a similar survey of classical references mentioning the basilisk in her article, "A Basilisk, a Phoenix, and a Philosopher's Stone: Harry Potter's Myths and Legends." However, despite her detailed descriptions of these sources, Huey fails to note the significance of this creature's association with Lord Voldemort and only refers to M. Katherine Grimes's argument that the episode with the basilisk illustrates Harry's heroism in the face of adversity, without taking into consideration this critic's claim that the basilisk also constitutes "evil in the body of a serpent" (Grimes 98).

The association of Rowling's basilisk with evil and death can be traced back to biblical references in the Old Testament books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The passages in Isaiah, "They hatch cockatrice's eggs and weave the spider's web: he that eateth of their eggs dieth, and that which is crushed breaketh out into a viper" (Isaiah, 59:5), and Jeremiah, "For, behold, I will send serpents, cockatrices, among you, which will not be charmed, and they shall bite you, saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 8:17) underscore the basilisk's treatment in Christianity as an emblem of sin and the spirit of evil, a wickedly fascinating serpent similar to that which tempted Eve in the book of Genesis (Breiner 115). Similarly, the grotesque basilisk in *The Chamber of Secrets* is the physical embodiment of Lord Voldemort's evil intentions as indicated by the fact that his alter ego, Tom Riddle, controls this monstrous creature and corrupts Ginny Weasley, who subsequently strangles the school roosters, paints the threatening messages on the walls, and releases "the serpent of Slytherin" on its unsuspecting victims (CS 229). Consequently, as a representation of sin, the corruption of innocence, and the temptation to sacrifice goodness, the basilisk personifies a deeper combination of physical and spiritual evil, which surpasses the terror inspired by its immense size and grotesqueness.

The snake motif makes its next appearance in *The Goblet of Fire* as part of Lord Voldemort's demonic dark mark and as the Dark Lord's serpentine sidekick, Nagini, who shares her name with a group of auspicious Indian deities called the *Naga*, which is Sanskrit meaning snake (Colbert 145). According to Indian mythology, the reptile is considered to be a semi-divine being, and there

are certain gods such as Vishnu who have snake bodies and are believed to possess healing powers (Borges 165; Kronzek & Kronzek 206). The Nagini (female form of *Naga*), in particular, are a group of snake deities portrayed as lovely women with the heads of serpents or surrounded by coiled serpents (Colbert 145).

Two aspects of Nagini's nature are revealed in *The Goblet of Fire*. Firstly, it is evident from the initial chapter that Voldemort is very weak, and that he is dependent on his servile serpent for nourishment because her venom helps to keep him alive. As he later tells Harry: "[using] a potion concocted from unicorn blood, and the snake venom Nagini provided . . . I was soon returned to an almost human form" (GF 569). In this sense Nagini is a distorted version of the Egyptian cobra goddess, Renenutet, whose name means "the provider of nourishment" (Watterson 97). Nagini's role as her master's savior is reinforced further in *The Half-Blood Prince* when Dumbledore surmises that she has assisted Voldemort in his quest for immortality by serving as one of the Horcruxes containing portions of his soul: "it [...] occurred to [Voldemort] to turn [Nagini] into his last Horcrux. She underlines the Slytherin connection, which enhances [his] mystique [...]. [H]e certainly likes to keep her close, and he seems to have an unusual amount of control over her, even for a Parselmouth" (HBP 473).

Secondly, Nagini promotes the cause of evil in her role as the Dark Lord's demonic familiar. For example, Nagini informs her master that "there is an old Muggle" listening in on his conversation with Wormtail (GF 17), and Voldemort subsequently kills the old man. Nagini continues in this role at the cemetery during Voldemort's resurrection ceremony where she "slither[s] through the grass, circling the headstone where [Harry is] tied" (GF 555) anxiously waiting the moment when the Dark Lord will keep his promise to sacrifice Harry and feed him to her. Nagini's bond with her master is clarified further in *The Order of the Phoenix* when Lord Voldemort takes possession of her body so that he may enter the Ministry of Magic in disguise and observe the well-guarded entrance to the Department of Mysteries for himself (OP 470). Two additional aspects of her character are revealed in *The Deathly Hallows*. The first is her ability to assume human form when she impersonates Bathilda Bagshot and lies in wait for Harry at Godric's Hollow so that she may alert her master to the young wizard's presence, and the second is her role as Voldemort's assassin, which is demonstrated when she obeys his command to kill Severus Snape (DH 527).

The snake motif in J.K. Rowling's series is also comparable to another serpent-related figure, the Green Witch in C.S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair*. This character personifies evil and is also identified as The Lady of the Green Kirtle (*The Silver Chair* [SC] 91), the Queen of the Deep Realm (SC 145) or the Queen of the Underland (SC 158). Clad in a poisonous green dress, the Green Witch is the ruler of the underground kingdom beneath Narnia, and it is she who kills the

Queen of Narnia and enslaves her son, Prince Rilian. She has the ability to transform herself into an enormous serpent, and it is in this form that she creeps toward the sleeping queen and kills her by stinging her hand. The snake is described as "great, shining, and as green as poison" (SC 57), an image that evokes the medieval association that this particular color has with malignancy and malevolence. J.K. Rowling makes good use of this connotation in her *Harry Potter* books as well, especially in her description of Riddle's "enormous serpent, bright, poisonous green" (CS 234), which is, of course, the deadly basilisk that slinks through the walls at Hogwarts in *The Chamber of Secrets*.

The Green Witch next reveals her true serpentine nature near the end of the book after Puddleglum the Marsh-Wiggle thwarts her attempt to place his companions under a seductive spell. Puddleglum stamps on the witch's fire and invokes Aslan's name in order to save his friends: "I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it" (SC 191). At this point the witch begins her transformation: "Her legs were intertwined with each other, and her feet disappeared. The long green train of her skirt thickened and grew solid, and seemed to be all one piece with the writhing green pillar of her interlocked legs" (SC 191). In a word, the witch becomes a "great serpent [...] green as poison" (SC 192) and it is in her true snake form that she is killed. In a similar manner, Harry invokes Dumbledore's name at the end of *The Chamber of Secrets* and it is this act that leads to the appearance of Dumbledore's pet Phoenix, Fawkes, who is instrumental when the time comes for Harry to slay the basilisk. Fawkes punctures the serpent's eyes so that it is unable to petrify Harry and then later the bird's tears heal the wound on Harry's arm. It is interesting that Fawkes saves Harry as according to legend it is another bird, the rooster, which travelers would carry as protection from basilisks (Colbert, 36).

In sum, it is clear from the numerous examples connecting Lord Voldemort to the snake that Rowling associates serpents with evil and death rather than with fertility and healing. In *The Philosopher's Stone*, the cloaked figure that drinks the unicorn blood is described as something that makes a "slithering sound" (PS 187), and the Dark Lord himself is described as having "the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake" (PS 212). Voldemort is further associated with the serpent in *The Chamber of Secrets* first when it becomes clear that just as the wizarding community is terrified of mentioning or hearing the Dark Lord's name, so too is Aragog, the gigantic spider first suspected of being the monster in *The Chamber of Secrets*, who also refrains from naming the creature inside the chamber. When Harry asks him who it is that he fears, Aragog replies, "We do not speak of it! [...] We do not name it!" (CS 206). Despite the spider's size and fierce power he is afraid of the creature so closely associated with tremendous evil. Next Voldemort's link with snakes is reiterated by Dumbledore who

explains that Harry can speak Parseltongue “because Lord Voldemort—who *is* the last remaining descendent of Salazar Slytherin—can speak Parseltongue” and “he transferred some of his own powers to [Harry] the night he gave [him his] scar” (CS 245). Additional links between the Dark Lord and the serpent motif appear in *The Goblet of Fire* when Voldemort himself admits that snakes were his animals of choice to inhabit at a time when he lacked human form because he has an affinity to them (GF 567); in *The Order of the Phoenix* when Harry, who has a mental link with his nemesis, views the attack on Mr. Weasley through Nagini’s eyes while she is inhabited by Lord Voldemort, and in *The Deathly Hallows* where Voldemort is finally susceptible to death once his last remaining Horcrux, Nagini, is destroyed at the hands of Neville Longbottom (DH 587).

As previously mentioned, there is a clear differentiation in the *Harry Potter* books between serpents and dragons. However, like serpents, dragons are also among the most recognizable magical creatures in myth and folklore. The word “dragon” is derived from the Greek *drakon* via the Latin *draco*, which literally means “big snake” (Ingersoll 165; Mode 267). This traditional antagonist appears in a wide variety of cultures including the folklore of China, Egypt and Greece as well as the early literature of Germany, Scandinavia and the English Isles. It is important to note that the East and West differ in their characterization of these magnificent beasts, as the Oriental dragon is perceived as benign and beneficial, while the European dragon is seen as demonic and evil. Despite the fact that the dragons in *Harry Potter* incorporate attributes taken from both Eastern and Western lore, Rowling’s creations are neither good nor evil but remain morally neutral throughout.

The dragon in Chinese lore, known as a *lung*, is one of four magic animals along with the unicorn, phoenix and tortoise (Borges 64). This mythical being has the ability to assume many shapes, but it is generally imagined as having a snake’s tail, wings and four claws. Moreover, according to oriental lore, the dragon is a divine and benevolent creature whose teeth, bones and saliva possess medicinal qualities (Borges 82; Ingersoll 96). The dragon also signifies wisdom, protects mankind, dispenses life-giving water, and heralds fertility and good fortune (Evans 31). For instance, the Celestial Dragon carries the palaces of the gods on its back; otherwise they might fall to earth and destroy the cities of men. The Divine Dragon makes the winds and rains for the benefit of mankind; the Terrestrial Dragon determines the course of streams and rivers, and the Subterranean Dragon stands watch over treasures forbidden to men (Borges 83). However, despite its benign nature the oriental dragon may also be unwittingly destructive due to its devastating ability to destroy the land with thunderstorms, tempests, whirlwinds and floods. Consequently, the myth of the evil dragon has its roots in ancient texts that appeared long before the creature’s demonization in Christian scriptures (Gordon 200).

J.K. Rowling incorporates the Oriental dragon's benevolence into her works in order to highlight the moral objectivity of her own dragons. For instance, the hide, heartstrings, and blood of dragons are used for the benefit of wizardkind, as illustrated in *The Philosopher's Stone* when Mr. Ollivander explains that the heartstrings of dragons are used in wand cores as "a powerful magical substance" (PS 64), and when Harry learns that Albus Dumbledore's discovery of the "twelve uses of dragon's blood" has added to his considerable fame (PS 77). Another example appears in *The Goblet of Fire* where the students at Hogwarts must wear dragon hide gloves for protection during the collection of bubotuber pus, which "can do funny things to the skin when undiluted" (GF 172).

The dragon is as familiar in the West as it is in the Orient; however, its forms and connotations are radically different. The Western development of the dragon is based primarily on Greek mythology and, according to Ernst Ingersoll, the earliest accounts have been traced back to the Greek legend of Cadmus who sent his company to draw water from the Spring of Ares. Upon learning that his men had been slain by a huge serpent, the dragon-guard of the fountain, he rushed to the spring and killed the dragon (Ingersoll 120). In addition to this tale there are several other legends describing an entire race of evil pre-historic 'dragons' against which heroic figures are destined to battle, including the Hydra, the Chimera, and the Gorgons.

Contrary to the Chinese tradition, the Anglo-Saxon dragon does not possess a kindly disposition and has nothing to do with rainfall or soil fertility. Instead, this fire-breathing monster is a symbol of human greed, a loathly worm guarding treasure it cannot enjoy, kidnapping maidens and wreaking havoc on the land (Gordon 200). One of the best-known examples of this type is Tolkien's infamous antagonist, Smaug the Golden. The dragon has attained a reputation for evil in other Western cultures as well. For example, Old Norse literature tells of a dragon named Fáfnir, who was once a dwarf but became hideously grotesque due to his greedy ownership of a cursed treasure, and Germanic legend describes fierce dragons that began life as men and were later transformed into dragons as a result of their insatiable greed (Evans 42).

The dragons in *Harry Potter* and these Western specimens have two traits in common: namely their conventional role as guardians and their reputation for ferocity. The first attribute is mentioned in passing in *The Philosopher's Stone* when Hagrid tells Harry that the high security vaults at Gringotts Bank are allegedly guarded by dragons (PS 51); a comment that is proven correct in *The Deathly Hallows* [DH] when Harry and his friends find the entrance to Bellatrix Lestrange's vault guarded by "a gigantic dragon" (DH 432). This quality is also referenced in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* [PA] when Fudge considers using dragons as guards at Hogwarts instead of Dementors (PA 453). The second characteristic

appears in *The Philosopher's Stone* when Hagrid's baby Norwegian Ridgeback bites several characters including Fang the boarhound, Ron Weasley, and Hagrid himself. The dragon's ferocity is particularly emphasized in *The Goblet of Fire* when Harry spies the "[f]our fully grown, enormous, vicious-looking dragons [...] rearing on their hind legs [...] roaring and snorting—torrents of fire [...] shooting into the dark sky from their open, fanged mouths, fifty feet above the ground on their outstretched necks" (GF 286).

Regardless of their ferocious natures, the dragons in *Harry Potter* do not represent evil, unlike the Western dragon which has been linked to the devil and the Anti-Christ. This association began during the Middle Ages and is influenced by imagery borrowed from the Old Testament books of Job, Isaiah and Micah (Ingersoll 130), and from the New Testament visions in the Book of Revelations where the word *dragon* is used metaphorically to designate a fallen angel or the devil (Borges 240; Gordon 200). This connection also provides some explanation for the devil's folkloric peculiarities such as his red color, his horns, wings, cloven hoofs and tail (Ingersoll 135), as suggested by the following passage in Revelations, which describes Satan as follows: "a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. [...] And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him" (Revelations 12:3, 9). This integration of a mythical creature with an evil biblical character reflects the dragon's association with evil in the Christian tradition.

Despite their majestic history, dragons were not taken seriously in the 19th century, and the stories in which they appear are often parodies of the classic myths featuring heroic dragon-slayers. L. Frank Baum's purple dragon exemplifies this tradition, as it is not frightening but humorous and likeable when it ties knots in its own tail during a tug-of-war game with the king in *The Purple Dragon and Other Fantasies* (18). Furthermore, in her article, "Victorian Dragons: The Reluctant Brood," Ruth Berman explains that the appearance of comic dragons in the 19th century led to the demise of the dragon's conventional association with the Satanic figure ("Victorian" 229) but in another article, "Dragons for Tolkien and Lewis," she maintains that the malevolent dragons portrayed in the 20th century fantasy works of Tolkien and Lewis were instrumental in reinstating the non-comical evil side of dragon nature ("Dragons" 57). Even though Rowling's marvelous dragons are not malicious and depraved, they are dangerous, powerful and terrifying both to the dragon-keepers who study and train them, and to the champions who encounter them during the Triwizard Tournament. Consequently, the dragons in the *Harry Potter* books should not be written off as ridiculous caricatures, but should be

appreciated as an important device that tests and ultimately displays the extent of the hero's valor, prowess and chivalry during his quest.

The most prominent dragons in 20th century fantasy literature are those of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. One of the strengths of Tolkien's classic works of fantasy, such as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Ring*, lies in his embodiment of radical evil in the Great Worms, or dragons (Matthews 64). According to the *Quenta Silmarillion*, which details the history of Arda, these ancient and awesome creatures were divided into three distinct breeds: immense serpents that slithered, those that walked, and those with wings (Day 197). They were further classified into two categories: the Cold-drakes who fought with fang and claw and whose power lay in strength and size alone, and the phenomenal Fire-drakes, who destroyed with fiery breath and as such constituted the more dangerous foes (Tyler 108). Regardless of classification, all dragons were large and heavily armored with scales of impenetrable iron, and had long, coiling tails as well as teeth and nails like spikes and blades. Their eyesight was keener than a bird of prey's, their hearing sharp enough to catch the slightest breath of the most silent enemy, and their sense of smell so acute they could name any creature by the least odor of its flesh (Day 197). Despite their immense strength, quick wit, and powers of intelligence and speech, the dragons' despicable flaws such as their vanity, gluttony, deceit, wrath and greed made them especially susceptible to evil and brought them into conflict with the other races of Middle-earth (Day 198; Tyler 108). However, most of the dragons were slain at the end of the second age, and only the strongest and most cunning survived (Tyler 109), including Smaug who is described in *The Hobbit* as "a most specially greedy, strong and wicked worm" (*Hobbit* 32).

Similar to the dragons in both Eastern and Western cultures, Smaug is a guardian of vast amounts of treasure: "There he lay, a vast red-golden dragon, fast asleep; a thrumming came from his jaws and nostrils, and wisps of smoke, but his fires were low in slumber. Beneath him, under all his limbs and his huge coiled tail, and about him on all sides stretching away across the unseen floors, lay countless piles of precious things, gold wrought and unwrought, gems and jewels, and silver red-stained in the ruddy light" (*Hobbit* 227). He is also intelligent, wily, and has a magical sense of smell, but it is his overwhelming pride that eventually proves his undoing when he boasts to Bilbo that "[n]o blade can pierce [him]" (238) and then reveals a weak spot on his soft underbelly: "a large patch in the hollow of his left breast as bare as a snail out of its shell" through which Bard the Bowman sends an arrow (239).

At times Tolkien's portrayal of Smaug includes some comic moments such as the riddling scene with Bilbo. However, Smaug's potential for serious evil still exists as illustrated by the following passage in which the enraged dragon attacks after he discovers that his cup is missing: "Smaug came hurtling from the

North, licking the mountain-sides with flame, beating his great wings with a noise like a roaring wind. His hot breath shriveled the grass before the door, and drove in through the crack [...]. The ponies screamed with terror, burst their ropes and galloped wildly off. The dragon swooped again and turned to pursue them, and was gone" (*Hobbit* 231).

Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback, an infant dragon that Hagrid attempts to raise from an egg in Rowling's *The Philosopher's Stone*, is similar to Smaug on a purely superficial level. Norbert is a magnificent and captivating creature, but he is hardly the "fluffy little bunny rabbit" that Hagrid treats him as (*PS* 173). The baby dragon may lack Smaug's intelligence and ability to communicate in human speech, but he grows at a tremendous rate and does not hesitate to lash out at the first unsuspecting human who gets too close. This becomes apparent when he literally bites the hand that feeds, and causes Ron's hand to become swollen and infected as a result of his venomous fangs. However, despite the fact that this dragon is an exotic and dangerous pet, who must be smuggled out of the country and returned to the wild, Norbert, unlike Smaug, is not aligned with the evil Lord Voldemort, and does not pose a serious threat to the existence of the wizard community. Even though Norbert is a morally neutral character, he does play an important role in the narrative, as discussed below.

C.S. Lewis also shares Tolkien's fascination with these strong, beautiful and dangerous creatures. The dragons of Narnia are similar to the fire breathing giant lizards that appear in Greek mythology, and are described as having "a long lead-colored snout, dull red eyes, no feathers or fur, a long lithe body that trailed on the ground, legs whose elbows went up higher than its back like a spider's, cruel claws, bat's wings that made rasping noises on the stones, yards of tail" (*The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* [VDT] 90). Its favorite food is fresh dragon meat (suggesting cannibalism) and it functions as a guardian of treasure (Ford 101).

In her article on Tolkien and Lewis, Berman mentions that none of the dragons appearing in *The Chronicles of Narnia* are as memorable as Smaug ("Dragons" 57), but it should be noted that their role in the allegorical plot is still significant. For instance, in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* Lewis uses the dragon as a symbol of redeemable evil in the transformation of the skeptical Eustace Clarence Scrubb, who first sees a dragon when he watches one crawl out of its lair and die. He then enters the dragon's cave and discovers the treasure that the creature has been hoarding. After contemplating all of the things he can do with the gold and jewels, he falls asleep, and when he wakes is horrified to see that while "[s]leeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself" (VDT 97). The dragon constitutes the outer form of Eustace's inner sinful disposition (Ford 119). Thus, he has turned into a dragon because of his irresponsibility, childishness, selfishness and

greed. Once he has changed into a huge, scaly dragon, Eustace realizes that he has been a monster for quite a while and that he must work his way back to humanity. In the form of this ugly beast he learns to value his friends and to help others: "Eustace's character had been rather improved by becoming a dragon" (VDT 107).

Eventually Aslan appears and Eustace must allow him to peel away the layers of dragon skin even though the process is excruciatingly painful. Eustace consents and Aslan strips the scales off Eustace until the real boy underneath is revealed. This is an indication of Lewis's belief that suffering is a prerequisite for moral rebirth and that acknowledging one's sinful condition and being willing to be delivered from evil are essential to the process of conversion and sanctification (Lindsakoog 74).

Morally neutral dragons also appear briefly in *The Last Battle* in a form of reverse evolution (Ford 101). The modern animals are called out of Narnia by Aslan, and then the dragons and dinosaur-like lizards come out to eat away the vegetation: "[t]he Dragons and Giant Lizards now had Narnia to themselves. They went to and fro tearing up the trees by the roots and crunching them up as if they were sticks of rhubarb" (*The Last Battle* [LB] 194). After they have completed the task of leaving the world bare, "the monsters themselves [grow] old and lay down and [die]" (LB 195), leaving their skeletons strewn across the countryside.

Rowling's dragons are easily recognizable as the same mythical beings prominently portrayed in the fantasy works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. However, this is where the similarity ends, as the abhorrent creatures that wreak havoc in *The Hobbit* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* are servants of evil (Matthews 137), while Rowling's dragons are morally neutral and serve neither good nor evil.

Despite their moral neutrality, the dragons in *Harry Potter* retain their long-established reputation as dangerous antagonists from remote and wild locations. There are several different breeds of dragon in Rowling's wizard world including Common Welsh Greens, Hebridean Blacks, Norwegian Ridgebacks, Hungarian Horntails, Swedish Short-Snouts and Chinese Fireballs. All of these creatures, despite their witty names, are huge, fire-breathing beasts with enormous jaws and razor-sharp fangs and talons. They can all fly and are "extremely difficult to slay, owing to the ancient magic that imbues their thick hides" (GF 296).

In addition, the wizard authorities in Rowling's series have structured a society that makes every attempt to rein in external powers such as dragons because they are viewed as possible threats to the well-being of both wizards and Muggles. In *The Philosopher's Stone*, Ron explains that "[d]ragon breeding was outlawed by the Warlock's convention of 1709" because they cannot be tamed

and are too conspicuous (*PS* 169), and in *The Goblet of Fire* Hermione accurately sums up the dragon issue when she observes that dragons are useful “but you wouldn’t want [one] for a pet, would you?” (*GF* 175).

The *Harry Potter* books contain three significant encounters with dragons. The first occurs in *The Philosopher’s Stone* when Harry and his friends discover that Hagrid has smuggled an illegal dragon egg into his hut and they are present when it hatches.

This episode functions on a number of levels in the novel including the levels of plot, character development, and aesthetics. In relation to the plot, it seems that Hagrid, to quote Tolkien, “[desires] dragons with a profound desire” (“On Fairy-Stories” 55), and it is this childlike weakness for them that makes him vulnerable to Quirrell’s treachery. Quirrell takes advantage of Hagrid’s wish to own a dragon and tricks him into revealing an important secret—how to get past the three headed dog guarding the trapdoor above the Philosopher’s Stone. As Hagrid tells Harry, “[the dragon dealer] asked a bit about the sorta creatures I look after [...]. So I told him, after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy [...]. Fluffy’s a piece o’ cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus’ play him a bit o’ music an’ he’ll go straight off ter sleep” (*PS* 194). It is interesting to note that in this particular episode, the dragon functions as a thematic antithesis. Instead of reinforcing the mythology of dragons as guardians of treasure, Norbert negates this traditional role as he sets in motion the events which enable Quirrell to elude the real guardian of the Philosopher’s Stone.

The dragon also serves as a means for furthering character development. For example, the incident with the infant dragon highlights two aspects of Hagrid’s complex character: his nurturing disposition and his penchant for breaking the rules. Hagrid is devoted to baby Norbert and cares lovingly for him. He feeds the dragon a disgusting combination of “brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour” (*PS* 170), sings it lullabies, admonishes Ron for frightening it, and gets emotional when it snaps at his fingers: “Bless him, look, he knows his mommy!” (*PS* 172). In addition, the fact that Hagrid harbors the dragon illegally coincides with his reputation for flouting the rules and offers insight into the reason for his expulsion from Hogwarts. In *The Chamber of Secrets* it is revealed that Hagrid was expelled for allegedly releasing another monster, and even though he is innocent of this charge it turns out that he had been harboring a dangerous spider named Aragog at the time.

Finally, the dragon plays an important role with regard to Harry’s main rival at Hogwarts, the sinister Draco Malfoy, whose first name may stem from two possible sources. First, it may be derived from the Latin word for dragon meaning large serpent. In this respect, Draco’s designation is connected to the demonic serpent motif rather than to Rowling’s portrayal of dragons, creatures that are morally neutral in the books. Draco’s personality traits make him a

perfect addition to Slytherin house, as he is a vicious, treacherous, and deceitful racist who enjoys inflicting misery on others. The second likely source for this name is the ancient Athenian lawyer, Draco, who imposed an unnecessarily harsh code of laws on the citizens of Athens (Schafer 61). Malfoy's "draconian" nature is most apparent in *The Philosopher's Stone* when he attempts to expose Norbert's existence and informs Professor McGonagall that Harry, Hermione and Neville have been wandering the school grounds at night with a dragon. This incident serves to underscore the rivalry between Harry and Draco, as Professor McGonagall punishes them all, including Malfoy, with detention as well as a 150 point house penalty (PS 175-76). Moreover, the resulting detention takes place in the Forbidden Forest, where Harry observes the hooded Quirrell drinking blood from a unicorn. Thus, the events surrounding Norbert's birth and escape advance the plot and highlight aspects of certain characters' personalities.

On an aesthetic level, the account of Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback's birth demonstrates that Rowling's skill at merging fantastic elements with distinct and realistic descriptions of imaginary beings is as proficient as Tolkien's and Lewis's. Her convincing depiction of the baby dragon evokes images akin to the birth of any genuine reptile: "All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped onto the table. [...] Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body, it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes" (PS 171-72). The dragon's subsequent sneeze releasing sparks into the air adds a realistic quality to the extraordinary description of the dragon's physical appearance and evinces Rowling's skill at combining elements of fantasy and reality in her works.

The second encounter with dragons in Rowling's series occurs in *The Goblet of Fire* during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament, which involves stealing an egg from a brooding she-dragon. The four dragons depicted in this book serve in the traditional role of obstacles that the school champions must overcome during their quest for the Triwizard Cup. These dragons may be portrayed as fierce and protective, but as Berman points out these attributes are not in themselves evil ("Victorian" 221). Rather, the dragons are merely loyal guardians standing in the way of marauding school champions bent on stealing their golden eggs. Consequently, the Hungarian Horntail dragon functions as a means of underscoring Harry's heroic nature and extraordinary flying skill: "And with a huge spurt of speed, he was off, he was soaring out over the stands, the heavy egg safely under his uninjured arm" (GF 311). In this sense, Harry can be compared to the dragon-slayers of myth and legend who seek a marvelous treasure guarded by a vicious dragon, such as Jason and the dragon of the Golden Fleece, Hercules and the Hesperidean dragon, or Beowulf and the unnamed dragon he encounters in his final adventure.

From a psychological point of view, the dragon in *The Goblet of Fire* is similar to Lewis's dragon in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* as both creatures highlight certain aspects of an individual's character. Akin to Lewis's dragon, which reflects Eustace's greed, Rowling's dragon plays a significant role in testing Harry's character, and subsequently demonstrating his moral reasoning and instinctive sense of fair play. This is illustrated when Harry, troubled by the knowledge that Cedric Diggory is the only champion unaware that he must confront a dragon during the first task, finds the first opportunity to inform his rival of the danger. When Cedric expresses surprise at this selfless gesture, Harry explains that fairness can only be achieved if all four champions are aware of the task ahead and start the tournament "on an even footing" (GF 299). Harry's actions are validated when Cedric returns the favor and provides Harry with a clue regarding the second task. As he says to Harry: "I owe you one for telling me about the dragons" (GF 375).

Moreover, the dragon symbolizes the pent-up anger that Harry feels toward Ron after their quarrel. Harry and Ron have a falling-out when the Goblet of Fire selects Harry's name for the Triwizard Tournament, and Ron stops speaking to him because he refuses to believe that Harry didn't break the tournament rule regarding eligibility. At this point in the story, Harry is furious with what he views as Ron's irrational behavior: "[Ron] walked straight out of the room, not looking at Harry. For a moment, Harry considered going after him—he wasn't sure whether he wanted to talk to him or hit him, both seemed quite appealing" (GF 273). In order to successfully steal the dragon egg, Harry must put aside his resentment toward Ron and focus on the task ahead: "The crowd was making a great deal of noise, but whether friendly or not, Harry didn't care. It was time to do what he had to do . . . to focus his mind, entirely and absolutely, upon the thing that was his only chance" (GF 309). In this sense, Harry's encounter with the dragon reflects the internal struggle that he must undergo if he is to contain his emotions instead of allowing them to dominate him. Harry's success against the dragon indicates that he has been able to tame his unruly passions, an important task in light of the forthcoming battle against Lord Voldemort. This episode also reveals aspects of Ron's personality, including a certain amount of resentment he feels toward Harry, but more importantly his willingness to acknowledge the error of his ways and make amends. Thus, when Ron watches Harry confront the dragon, he realizes the real danger his best friend faces by virtue of being selected as a champion and subsequently apologizes to Harry by saying that: "whoever put your name in that Goblet – I – I reckon they're trying to do you in!" (GF 313).

The final encounter with a dragon in the series occurs in *The Deathly Hallows* when Harry and his friends conspire to enter Gringotts illegally so that they may obtain the Horcrux located within Bellatrix Lestrange's vault. The vault

is guarded by a dragon, which subsequently proves useful to the protagonists as they release it from its restraints and escape from the pursuing Death Eaters by "clinging to its back" as "it [forces] its way through the metal doors and [...] [launches] itself into the sky" (*DH* 439). The dragon's neutrality is retained in this episode as it does not willingly choose to come to the heroes' aid but follows its natural instinct to escape its confines: "the great crawling, snarling beast seemed to sense freedom and space ahead of it" (*DH* 438), and the fact that it enables Harry and the others to elude their pursuers is merely an added benefit.

In sum, the dragon is as old as the imagination and has prevailed in the historic, social and artistic works of numerous cultures the world over. In the East it is seen as a benevolent being connected with the fundamental life-giving energies of nature, a sign of good fortune, and a symbol of leadership, while in the West it is perceived as the natural enemy of mankind (Colbert 65; Kronzek & Kronzek 67). Due to its ferocious appearance and scorching breath, the dragon is associated with craftiness, cruelty and gluttony (Kronzek & Kronzek 66), and from the Middle Ages has been connected with the biblical serpent responsible for man's exile from Eden. Consequently, the dragon is depicted as a representative of sin, wickedness and the battle of good against evil (Colbert 65; Kronzek & Kronzek 67).

Despite the dragon's prevalent association with evil in ancient mythology and in contemporary works of fantasy literature, the dragons in the *Harry Potter* series are not representatives of evil. Rowling has incorporated several traits from both Eastern and Western dragon lore, such as the usefulness of the dragon's hide and blood and its standard function as a guardian, in order to indicate that these creatures are morally neutral entities. Furthermore, Rowling's dragons are important to advancing the main themes in the series. In *The Philosopher's Stone*, Norbert provides opportunities for individual characters to reveal certain traits and qualities such as Hagrid's tenderness and Malfoy's slyness, and the Hungarian Horntail in *The Goblet of Fire* enables Harry to express his noble sense of fair play and Ron his resentment and remorse. The dragon is also meaningful in terms of plot development as Norbert's existence is crucial to the revelation of Fluffy's secret and eventually leads to Harry's encounter with Quirrell/ Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest just as it enables the trio's escape from Gringotts in the final novel. Finally, Rowling's dragons retain their neutrality throughout the series and do not choose sides in the ultimate battle between good and evil but do fulfill an aesthetic function by adding to the fundamental sense of wonder, mystery and suspense in her magical world.

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